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Judging violent resistances: Camus's artistic sensibility and the grey zone of rebellion

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Abstract

The paper engages the grey zone of violent resistance – the morally ambiguous situations facing liberation activists that have generally fallen outside the grasp of transitional justice scholarship. For this purpose, it draws on Albert Camus's artistic sensibility, reconstructing how his artistic appeal to the limits of rebellion can tackle the difficulty of judging violent resistance. The paper demonstrates the relevance of Camus's artistic sensibility on the case of the armed anti-apartheid struggle. It analyses two South African novels, Afrika's *The Innocents* and Wicomb's *David's Story*, in an attempt to show how their literary insights can enrich the official vision of reconciliation as propounded by the TRC.

Keywords: Albert Camus, artistic sensibility, violent rebellion, grey zone, South Africa

I. Introduction

The issue of violent resistance to oppression remains a challenging topic for transitional justice scholarship. What remains insufficiently explored, in particular, is the grey zone of violent resistance – the morally ambiguous choices and situations facing liberation activists that stem from their embeddedness within the very structures and relationships that resistance ultimately tries to subvert. Zoë Wicomb aptly summarized “the paradox” of an armed liberation struggle: “to take up arms [...] is to enter the ugly world that has to be overthrown.”¹ The evasion of this ambiguity within the transitional justice literature can be well demonstrated on the example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While the TRC has openly broached the issue of resistance justice, it has done so within the abstract framework of humanitarian law standards. It has thus failed to adequately examine the complexities of the anti-apartheid struggle as well as the systemic pattern of political violence in South Africa. The TRC’s omission of the ambiguities surrounding violent resistance is reflective of the predominant moral-juridical orientation within the scholarship, which works with neat categories of victims and perpetrators. Unaccounted for are the grey realities of complicity with – and resistance to – injustice that elude the grasp of clear-cut categories of good and evil. And yet, the theme of violent resistance is important for bringing to the forefront the dilemmas and uncertainties of political action against the

background of systemic violence. As such, it also represents a valuable resource through which to rethink the potentials for reconciliation.²

To reclaim judgement of the grey zone of resistance, I draw on Albert Camus's existential, artistic insight into the experiential reality and ambiguity of rebellious politics. Camus's artistic sensibility was shaped by an awareness of the irreversible loss of moral absolutes in modernity, and the concomitant recognition of the uncertainty of political action. In line with this outlook, Camus was particularly concerned with the problem of the justifiability and costs of violence employed in the service of freedom. Against self-certain, rational justifications of violence ruling the revolutionary struggles of his day, his artistic sensibility set forth a vision of rebellion attentive to the limits that accrue from acting in a plural world. His appeal to limits has often been interpreted as a moralistic refusal to assume the tragic exigencies and difficult choices inherent in resistant action.³ In contrast, I argue that it offers a situated insight into the grey zone of violent rebellion, where the refusal of complicity with an oppressive regime also needs to confront the burden of adding to the violence of the world. On this basis, the paper reconstructs how Camus's artistic sensibility can tackle the difficulty of judging violent resistance in two important ways. First, it opens the space where violent resistance and responsibility for it can be approached in terms of its effects upon the intersubjective character of the world – rather than an abstract standard of either an idealist or

historicist kind. Second, it draws attention to the need to expose and confront the resilient conditions that render violence a necessary course of affairs.

The paper demonstrates the relevance of Camus's artistic sensibility on the concrete case of the armed anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa by analysing two South African novels: Tatamkhulu Afrika's *The Innocents* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*. Literary insights are put in dialogue with the official judgement of violent resistance as contained in the TRC Report, in an attempt to show how they can enrich the Commission's vision of reconciliation.

II. The problem of violent resistance and the TRC

The issue of violent resistance has received surprisingly little attention within the transitional justice literature. The South African TRC in this respect is notable for openly broaching the issue of human rights violations committed by the anti-apartheid liberation movements.⁴ In doing so, however, the Commission adopted the principle of "legal equivalence," whereby "[a] gross violation is a gross violation, whoever commits it and for whatever reason."⁵ Drawing upon international humanitarian law – and the international standards of just war in particular – the TRC granted the justness of the (armed) resistance struggle against the evil of apartheid, but argued that the justness of

the end did not excuse committing human rights violations. While it insisted that state actors bore the greatest responsibility for past wrongs, the Commission also held the liberation movements “morally and politically accountable” for the abuses committed “in the course of their political activities and armed struggles.”⁶ The TRC’s engagement with the issue of violent resistance then displayed a lack of nuance in considering the circumstances, purpose or consequences of violent acts committed by the apartheid state, the resistance fighters, and within liberation movements themselves. This principle of legal equivalence has since been severely criticized. Several scholars noted that it had obscured the distinct challenges, losses and suffering of resistance fighters, artificially subsuming their experience under the categories of either victims or perpetrators.⁷ Critics also argued that the TRC failed to consider the context of the violent conflict and mistakenly used the same criteria to judge the pervasive systematic violence of apartheid and the “scattered human rights infringements” incurred in the fight against it.⁸

The TRC’s omission of the particularity of violent resistance is reflective of its reliance on the predominant moral-juridical orientation within the scholarship, which assumes it is possible to arrange the complexities of agency in neat categories of victims and perpetrators. What remains unaccounted for is the so-called “grey zone” – those murky areas that elude the grasp of clear-cut categories of good and evil and instead are inhabited by varied dynamics of complicity and resistance.⁹ The underlying problem is

that the victim-perpetrator framework rests on the rational, legalistic conception of moral agency, understood as the ability to follow pre-given normative ideals, regardless of the agents' embeddedness in a larger field of relationships and structures beyond their immediate control.¹⁰ As such, the moral-juridical paradigm bears potentially troubling political implications. Not only does it subscribe to a comforting view of past violence as deviation from the established moral norms, while failing to acknowledge the socio-political circumstances that made mass human rights violations possible. It also tends to conceive of the desired goal of transition as the re-establishment of a stable and just political order, while obfuscating the resilient forms of interaction that promote new practices of exclusion.¹¹

In the case of the TRC, indeed, an exploration of the dilemmas of political action in the context of structurally ingrained patterns of political violence remained subordinate to the primary purpose of demonstrating "the moral fact of gross human rights violations."¹² In line with this focus, the Commission's legalist judgement of violent resistance served the aim of acknowledging the human rights abuses committed by all sides of the struggle and grounding in stories of (universal) human suffering a new-found commonality.¹³ To be sure, the TRC's vision of reconciliation relied on opening the public space to a plurality of testimonies, to capture the systemic pattern of injustice.¹⁴ Yet, it did so through an "aggregation" of individual experiences of suffering and wrongdoing, which precluded a deeper insight into the specific dynamics

of political violence in South Africa.¹⁵ An exploration of the murky landscape of armed resistance, to the contrary, might help critically evaluate and challenge the entrenched ways of reasoning through which human rights violations became a normalized and justified course of affairs.¹⁶

Against this background, this article sheds light on the “grey zone” of violent resistance, with a particular focus on the armed liberation struggle in South Africa. It aims to provide a situated insight into violent resistance as inhabiting a morally ambiguous space of painful choices, which cannot be adequately addressed with abstract moral standards. This moral ambiguity of resistance struggle results from its embeddedness within the very discourses, practices and processes that underpin the systemic oppression that resistance ultimately tries to subvert. Thus, focusing on the grey zone within the resistance camp arguably helps illuminate the subtle forms of complicity in the conditions that made past human rights violations possible, and the possibilities and limits of resisting them.¹⁷ In contrast to the TRC’s abstract legal focus, such a line of inquiry would explore how violent resistances were conditioned by the systemic violence and discourses of victimization; the extent to which they contributed to or broke away from the vicious cycles of violence; their costs and the forms of solidarity they inspired. To engage with these questions, the next section draws on Camus’s existential, artistic sensibility and its insights into the experiential reality and ambiguity of rebellious politics.

III. Camus and the grey zone of violent rebellion

Camus's vision of rebellion and its ambiguities is importantly underpinned by his existential artistic sensibility and its attentiveness to the situated and uncertain character of human action in a political world that no longer answers to the rule of transcendent foundations. In large part, his artistic disposition and its appeal to limits was framed as an effort to understand and challenge the advent of what he called "logical crime" – the tendency to rationalize violence in the service of a doctrine or idea, while removing it from the sphere of human judgement.¹⁸ Against this tendency, this section reconstructs how Camus's artistic appeal to limits can illuminate and confront the ambiguity of violent rebellion. First, it explores how Camus's artistic sensibility discloses a way of distinguishing between different violent rebellious actions with a view to the concrete standard of human plurality. Second, it delves into his artistic attempts to break the entrenched cycles of violence and uncover the possibilities for solidarity beyond the divides enforced by structural oppression.

For Camus, rebellion is an expression of human freedom and dignity that ultimately stems from the awareness of the absurd. The absurd refers to the existential condition of human thought and action after the irreversible breakdown of traditional absolutes in modernity. As Camus writes, it denotes the experience of being "an alien, a stranger," situated in a plural, unpredictable and ambiguous world lacking an ultimate purpose.¹⁹

Therefore, the biggest challenge confronting rebellious thought and action is to learn how to live and act, without “the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.”²⁰ Artistic sensibility here provides a promising alternative to the foundationalism of modern political thought – the desire to grasp the ultimate truth or *telos* of human existence.²¹ As Camus observes, the moderns have “killed” God, but have been less willing to accept the implications that this murder entails and never abandoned their desire for certainty “that only a God can provide.”²² Rationalist ethical and political systems were politically troubling because they sought to explain and order the whole of human reality in accordance with abstract categories of thought, while betraying its finite, plural and ambiguous character. Camus’s artistic attitude, in contrast, abandoned the philosophical desire for complete knowledge, to instead revel in describing and accounting for human embodied relationships with the world and others, without “any idea of finality.”²³ What Camus referred to as the sensibility of an artist then is not limited only to his fictional works, but signifies a broader ethical and political orientation that he conveyed throughout his philosophical, political and literary writings.²⁴ It denotes a mode of relating to the world characterized by a careful “attentiveness” to its untameable plurality and ambiguity.²⁵ For Camus, it provided a medium for reinvigorating an *experiential* ground for moral and political action, attentive to the limits of the world and those of different others.²⁶

On the political plane, Camus was particularly wary of modern teleological doctrines that – most prominently in the historicist spirit of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition – ruled the revolutionary struggles of his day. For him, these doctrines were based on a troubling logic of nihilism: they confronted the absurd by conceiving of rebellion as the progressive realization of an abstract, predetermined idea, culminating in absolute justice. This presumption of absolute freedom to construct new values, however, entailed a radical negation of human embodied, worldly being.²⁷ As Camus aptly summarized the implications: any means could be justified as necessary to achieve the abstract ends of future justice.²⁸ Rebellion modelled on artistic sensibility, in contrast, involves a simultaneous rejection and affirmation of reality.²⁹ The artist's rebellion "is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is."³⁰ Rebellion arises in response to particular situations of oppression, and not in order to realize a pre-conceived end of history. In rejecting injustice, it implicitly affirms the existence of a limit beyond which oppression will not be tolerated and also of "a standard of values" that should be upheld "at all costs."³¹ Importantly, these values do not belong to the rebel alone, but articulate a demand for universal respect of common human dignity.³² Rebellion as an affirmation of the inherent dignity of human worldly existence implies the understanding that life is "the single necessary good" for all human beings.³³ The human community invoked in rebellion then is not predicated upon a transcendent moral principle, such as universal

human nature. It arises from the realization that the absurd condition of human existence is not merely an individual burden to be suffered in solitude, but a common human fate.³⁴ A judgement on the unacceptability of injustice thus always-already contains an appeal to the humanity of others, the same rebellious impulse that refuses to be crushed under the weight of an idea.

The artistic attentiveness to human worldly existence here translates into a commitment to kindling the human condition of plurality. Resisting the tendency to subordinate the embodied presence of others to a tool in a war of abstractions, it always strives to see them as concretely situated, living individuals.³⁵ Camus's plural orientation mirrors Hannah Arendt's understanding of human plurality as a fundamental condition of human existence, bearing the two-fold character of equality and distinction. For Arendt, human plurality refers to the fact that human beings are capable of manifesting their unique humanity through action and speech, yet can only do so in the company of their peers, distinct equals, who can endow particular words and deeds with an intersubjective meaning.³⁶ As such, it is not a problem to be solved in the search for a (rational) consensus on the appropriate ends of political action. It is the very condition for bringing into existence a shared, public world, where human beings can come to terms with the worldly character of political affairs and decide what they "can and cannot do."³⁷ Camus's artistic striving to see others as concretely situated individuals echoes Arendt's insights in that it entails a commitment to bringing to light the common

humanity by embracing the differences that compose it. On this account, the solidarity affirmed in rebellion is not based on psychological identification, community of interest or a definite cause that presses others into agreement and instructs on the course of rebellious action. It is grounded in revealing the individual experiences of the absurd, suffering, injustice, or exile as (human) situations common to all.³⁸ Akin to Arendt's notion of a shared world, Camus's artistic perspective thereby provides a platform, where different perspectives can be revealed and negotiated through their mutual interaction.³⁹ It is this loyalty to human plurality that serves as an immanent criterion for judging rebellious practices, imposing a boundary that they must not transgress.⁴⁰

Among the left-wing intellectuals associated with *Les Temps Modernes*, Camus's appeal to limits and his rejection of revolutionary violence earned him the title of a "counter revolutionary."⁴¹ Camus's position, Jean-Paul Sartre and Francis Jeanson insisted, amounted to an ethically troubling refusal to engage the murky realities of politics, and ended up affirming complicity with the existing structures of oppression.⁴² Yet, Camus's insistence upon limits amounts not to an absolute rejection of violence, but to a displacement of the opposition between moral purity and political efficiency as the only viable political alternatives.⁴³ The principle of absolute non-violence recoils from the injustice, bloodshed and despair ruling the political world and can only find solace in an attitude of "abstention."⁴⁴ It in effect "sanctions" systemic violence.⁴⁵ Rational violence in the service of a doctrine, however, is just as "removed from reality"

in that it purports to grasp the underlying Truth of history, regardless of human plurality and the ensuing uncertainty of political action.⁴⁶ Rather than an engagement with the grey realities of violent resistance, it implies a willing acceptance of tragic choices and painful stages to be redeemed at the end of history. In contrast to both these positions, the artistic loyalty to limits offers insight into the situated ambiguity of violent rebellion – maintaining the contradiction between a commitment to fighting injustice and the recognition that a resort to violent means breaches the value of the living community as the very source of rebellion.⁴⁷ It opens the space where this contradiction can be creatively confronted through a consideration of a plurality of different perspectives on the world. In the following, I demonstrate the significance of this artistic orientation to judging violent rebellion by engaging Camus’s play *The Just* and his series of journalistic essays, *Neither Victims, Nor Executioners*.

The Just is based on the historical example of the Russian terrorists of 1905, who, in the fight against an oppressive economic and political system, decide to assassinate the Grand Duke Sergei. The lived insight into the contradiction of rebellion is conveyed through the perspective of Ivan Kaliayev, also known as “the Poet.”⁴⁸ Kaliayev’s artistic sensibility is reflected in the fact that his commitment to fighting injustice draws inspiration from his love of life and of this world, the values of beauty and happiness.⁴⁹ Stepan, a former political prisoner, finds the Poet’s attitude suspect, lacking “true” revolutionary credentials and discipline.⁵⁰ Determined to throw the bomb at the Grand

Duke's carriage, further, Kaliyev aborts his assassination attempt when he notices that Sergei's niece and nephew are travelling along in the carriage.⁵¹ Stepan admonishes such "squeamishness," arguing that the eventual triumph of the revolution and its vision of absolute justice justifies "doing anything and everything."⁵² Kaliyev and his lover, Dora, in contrast, insist that their fight against injustice must contain a sense of measure: "Even destruction has a right and a wrong way, and there *are* limits."⁵³

The just assassins' affirmation of limits to violence leads to a reconsideration of the relationship between means and ends, as well as of the way of conceiving of the just cause. As Kaliyev exclaims: "I love the men who are alive today [...] It is for *them* that I am fighting [...] I shall not strike my brothers in the face for the sake of some unknown... distant city!" What Kaliyev opposes is Stepan's blind faith in an ultimate future end, underlain by a nihilist disregard for – even hatred of – life in the present. Stepan admits his dogmatism arose from the experience of degradation and torture in the Czarist prison, which undermined his trust in fellow humans.⁵⁴ Yet, he fails to consider that his reasoning ultimately mirrors the dehumanisation inherent in the system. For Kaliyev, indeed, Stepan's abstract justification of violence obscures the ambiguity of judgement and responsibility, degrading the rebel to a mere instrument of murder and risking a lapse into "another kind of tyranny."⁵⁵ A wholehearted embrace of crime on this account is bound to betray the very cause which the revolution had sought to serve.

Kaliyev is likewise despairing of the unjust political conditions that “have forced us to be murderers,” yet is determined to fight these conditions by affirming, even in violence, the value of human solidarity.⁵⁶ Kaliyev challenges Stepan’s vision of a just cause, arguing that he will not kill the Duke “by yourself... for no cause,” but “with us... on behalf of the Russian people!” If the solidarity for the suffering people serves as the only justification for political murder, violence cannot be rationalized in the service of absolute justice, defined from a position of solitary mastery, above others and the common world. Such justifications consign the authority to define and pursue justice to those in power, while seeing others as silent and enslaved objects that can be easily sacrificed for the realization of pre-given ends. Thus, they are bound to lose their ground and inspiring principle in the intersubjective character of the world and risk reproducing the dynamics of systemic oppression.⁵⁷ In rebellion oriented by the value of human solidarity, to the contrary, violence can only be legitimately undertaken for the sake of the world, as an “extreme limit which combats another form of violence.”⁵⁸ As Camus insists, rebellion loyal to its limits will only resort to violent means to, for instance, denounce instances of oppression or to establish institutions “which limit violence, not for those which codify it.”⁵⁹ Rather than predefining the future vision of justice, it contains an appeal towards the establishment of conditions under which all individuals will be able to exercise their freedom and their right to state “what is just and what is unjust.”⁶⁰ This orientation allows violence to remain “provisional,”⁶¹

enabling us to judge when violent means degenerate and turn against the very cause of human plurality that they were meant to uphold.

Further, the play conveys the sense that violence, even against the oppressor, exacts a human cost, which cannot be assuaged by any future achievement of justice but carries with it “an ineradicable moment of accountability.”⁶² After Kaliayev eventually assassinates the Duke, he is determined to pay for his action by sacrificing his own life. In response to the Duchess’s offer of forgiveness, Kaliayev refuses to repent and reduce his assassination to a morally wrong act of murder. Behind the Duchess’s simplified moral condemnation of the act, we intuit, lies a generalized despair over this “empty and cruel” world that can only find solace in the embrace of another, eternal world.⁶³ In contrast, Kaliayev assumes responsibility by affirming the ambiguity of his violent rebellion as a political act predicated not upon despair, but his love for fellow humans and the world.⁶⁴ In his insistence on sacrificing his life, he both exposes the unjust conditions of political action that have “[forced him] into crime,” while also refusing to rationalize violence into a necessary course of affairs.⁶⁵ Awaiting the news of his execution, Kaliayev’s comrades similarly reflect on their burden of responsibility. While they are resolved to continue their fight, they also remain attuned to how easily a decision to resort to violence might metamorphose into an indiscriminate embrace of terror.⁶⁶ The just assassins are aware that the human cost of violence cannot be understood primarily with reference to a morally stained self that could repent and be

redeemed. Their example directs attention to the broken relationships and the fractured fabric of the world, the conditions that perpetuate the unjust circumstances of political action and increase the likelihood of further violence.

Camus's artistic engagement with the ambiguity of rebellious violence, then, does not resolve its tragic dilemma by offering a theoretical procedure for determining the legitimate use of violence.⁶⁷ It reveals how easily the procedure of justifying ignoble means by worthy ends can slide into a generalized defence of violence, making it impossible to judge between acceptable and unacceptable acts. Camus's dialogical focus, in contrast, points to a way of maintaining important distinctions between violent rebellious practices, keeping constantly in view the concrete possibilities for freedom they may open or foreclose, as well as the dangers of their reproducing the dynamics of systemic oppression.

Camus remained constantly aware of the political conditions that render violence inevitable. After the French Liberation, he initially hoped that the sense of common purpose uniting the resistance fighters would pave the way for a social revolution. Soon, however, his enthusiasm gave way to a concern with the recalcitrant effects of systematic injustice that allowed for no easy transcendence. In his 1946 *Combat* series of essays, *Neither Victims, Nor Executioners*, Camus characterized these effects in relation to forms of political mentality that divided the world into the good and the evil and reduced agents to being either victims or executioners. He denounced the "infernal

cycle” of mutual denunciation, where each side justified its crimes in light of the excesses of the other.⁶⁸ He called this “the conspiracy” of fear and silence, condemning the tendency to silence dissent and force people to choose between opposing sides, each of which claimed absolute truth.⁶⁹

Against this tendency, Camus called for dialogue grounded in a refusal to be either a victim or an executioner.⁷⁰ This is not to be understood as a form of compromise that leaves unchallenged existing structures of injustice. Instead it leads to a renegotiation of the terms of the political community.⁷¹ For Camus, the victim-executioner binary was based on a utopian faith in “an earthly paradise,” that paradoxically foreclosed the possibility of a meaningful future.⁷² This is because, in seeking to make its absolute ideas part of political reality, it was bound to obscure the complexity of the world. Far from remedying injustice, it threatened to engulf the world into the “carnage” of “ideological warfare.”⁷³ The same consideration guided Camus’s judgement in the case of the Algerian war. While his condemnation of the terrorist tactics on the part of the Algerian liberation fighters has been interpreted as a refusal to venture outside the frame of the colonial status *quo*, his perspective revealed how the ideological justifications of violence on both sides of the struggle in fact blurred the actual concerns of social justice and political liberty.⁷⁴ In contrast, his artistic sensibility strove to foreground a “relative utopia,” aiming to reclaim the possibility of “human action” against the supposed “necessity” of history.⁷⁵

This relative utopia was based on the human ability to “imagine” and judge any political decision or event in light of “their repercussion on living people.”⁷⁶ It entailed a refusal to be trapped by the entrenched ideological polarities and a commitment to denouncing all instances of injustice, regardless of the “noble” ends pursued by their champions.⁷⁷ This implied a willingness to self-critically consider one’s actions in relation to a plurality of perspectives, without, however, lending indiscriminate justification to the other side.⁷⁸ When Camus appealed to the socialists to reject the Marxist dialectics of means and ends, for instance, he also was careful to point out this rejection was not tantamount to embracing bourgeois freedom, which has been historically used “to justify a very real oppression.”⁷⁹ By contextualizing any action or justification, Camus’s artistic sensibility sought to create the conditions for the building of “a living society” of people “without a kingdom,” willing to interact beyond the ideological divides enforced by structural injustice.⁸⁰ On this account, rebellion accepts the impossibility of final redemption and insists that a judgement on how to change the world to the better can only be arrived at dialogically, rather than pronounced from on high.⁸¹

IV. A literary insight into the ambiguities of resistance violence in South Africa

One may argue that Camus's insights into the grey zone of violent rebellion are less than adequate to account for the case of the protracted conflict in South Africa, where violence became a systematic policy on all sides. As I have attempted to show in the previous section, however, the relevance of Camus's artistic perspective lies in unearthing a space where violent resistance can be judged in terms of its effects upon the intersubjective character of the world – as opposed to a matter of abstract necessity. This section demonstrates the relevance of Camus's artistic sensibility for the concrete case of the armed anti-apartheid struggle by analysing the two chosen South African novels. Both embody Camus's commitment to human plurality, recognizing the complexities of violent resistance through a juxtaposition of a plurality of narrative voices. The first novel, *The Innocents*, exemplifies his insights into the limits of violent rebellion and the challenge of responsibility, while the second, *David's Story*, elaborates on his efforts to confront the recalcitrant conditions that make violence appear inevitable. These literary insights are put in dialogue with the official narrative in the TRC Report, in an attempt to show how they can enrich the Commission's vision of reconciliation.

1. Afrika's *The Innocents*: The limits of violence and the challenge of responsibility

The Innocents recounts the undertakings of a small Muslim terrorist cell whose members must reconcile their commitment to black liberation with their ingrained religious views about the impermissibility of violence.⁸² To fight against apartheid, Yusuf and his friends, Himma, Mailie and Vincent, decide to join the armed wing of the resistance struggle, the People's Army. They quickly learn that liberation is a dirty enterprise.⁸³ Maponya, the local leader of the Movement, challenges Yusuf: "Tell me, Yusuf, have you ever killed a man, shot away his face, slipped a knife in his gut [...] I see from your face you have not. Could you?"⁸⁴ They understand that they are leaving behind the reassurance of clear-cut standards on the (in)justifiability of violence. While they frequently call to some higher authority, either God or the rules of Holy War, that "might sanction what seemingly could not be sanctioned," their appeals remain unanswered.⁸⁵ They have ventured beyond "the point of no return," a territory of unknown outcomes and potentially tragic consequences.⁸⁶

To prove their worthiness as fighters, they commit acts of sabotage against symbols of white privilege and complicity with the oppressive system. The ambiguity of violent rebellion comes to the fore when they decide to attack a restaurant with "live" targets inside. Their reasoning is underpinned by their recognition of the pervasiveness of systemic violence, the deeply ingrained structures of racial and economic inequality,

with which “the rich whitey” is complicit by default.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Yusuf also reminds his comrades that, despite their privileged position in the system, these people’s deaths cannot be easily instrumentalised for the greater cause of justice.⁸⁸ Just as his fight against injustice is based on an affirmation of solidarity across the divisions of race, he avoids abstract definitions of “the enemy” and is attentive to important distinctions among the perspectives and attitudes of the “oppressors.”⁸⁹ Accordingly, they decide to merely frighten, rather than harm the diners, while nevertheless acknowledging the possibility of tragic accidents.⁹⁰ Their position is in sharp contrast to Maponya’s, for whom the killing of “innocent” people does not represent just a tragic exigency of war, but assumes the mantle of moral rightness. He asks: “in this country, who is to say who is guilty and who is innocent? If a white woman, or child, or clerk in an office, hates me because my skin is black, is this not also my enemy?”⁹¹ This tension emerges again when, during the planning of another attack, Yusuf encounters internal opposition from Mailie. Thandi, Maponya’s niece and right arm, passes a gun to him: “It is a gift. From Maponya. For shooting dogs that disobey.”⁹² Yusuf adamantly refuses the methods of “the pitiless, blind giant of revolution,” and angrily responds: “Tell Maponya I do not need men who follow me because I have a gun.”⁹³ While he aims to lead the squad in line with their common allegiance to the fight against oppression, he also wants to ensure that this commitment remains oriented by a sense of mutual friendship within the group. Rather than resorting to Thandi’s rule of expediency, he

maintains in their deliberations a dialogical openness to the opinions and concerns of his comrades.⁹⁴

Yusuf's rebellion against Maponya's vision of a "worthy" revolutionary echoes Camus's exploration of the lived dimension and the limits of violent rebellion, posing a critical mirror to the TRC's principle of legal equivalence. The TRC, to be sure, noted the important difference in the violations committed by, for instance, the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the two main liberation movements. While the ANC mainly stayed within the framework of international humanitarian law, PAC's policy was to "consciously [target] certain categories of civilians, and whites in general."⁹⁵ Yet, the TRC Report failed to account for how these different justificatory strategies were grounded in the ways in which the liberation movements related to the discourses of oppression ruling the apartheid state. Yusuf's questioning of the abstract justification of violence and his commitment to human plurality, in this respect, highlight the importance of drawing a distinction between the essentially racist framework of PAC and the multi-racial, democratic commitment of the ANC. Seeking to create a raceless society, the PAC paradoxically formulated the end of revolutionary action in line with a "racially assertive nationalism." This principle, in turn, destined one of the existent race groups, the white, to extinction, thereby reinforcing the racial truth of apartheid.⁹⁶ The ANC, in contrast, refused to conceive of the fight against oppression in terms of liberation of a pre-given identity

and rejected the “One Settler, One Bullet” ideology of PAC.⁹⁷ It sought to break out of the framework of viewing the members of different race groups as merely abstract representatives of either “a despised race” or “a privileged and hated group.”⁹⁸ It envisioned a multi-racial alliance, where varied groups would converge in the fight against apartheid, and resorted to armed struggle for the sake of establishing the conditions of freedom and justice for all groups within the South African society.⁹⁹ Its vision of liberation enabled the ANC to employ a sense of “restraint” in identifying its targets.¹⁰⁰ In response to the apartheid state’s blurring the distinction between military and civilian targets – in particular, its declaration of certain border regions as military zones where farmers were trained as para-military units – the ANC lay anti-tank mines in Transvaal rural areas, yet abandoned the campaign when it became clear that it led to numerous civilian deaths.¹⁰¹

Due to its engagement with the grey areas of resistance struggle, *The Innocents* also exposes the challenge of responsibility in ways that the TRC’s focus on individual redemption and absolution could not.¹⁰² This is most evident in the last act, Yusuf’s tragic killing of Mailie. Yusuf finds that, following a failed attack, and their capture and interrogation by the police, Mailie had talked – a betrayal that resulted in other three fighters’ capture and Maponya’s death. In a confrontation, Mailie draws out a gun and Yusuf ends up stabbing him with a knife. While acknowledging that the act could not be wholly justified on the grounds of self-defence, he refuses to see it as a necessary means

to further the cause of revolution.¹⁰³ Akin to Kaliyev's reckoning with his violent act, Yusuf eschews repentance and a return to innocence, and is determined to continue the fight against oppression. Just as he rejects the perspective of divine grace, however, he refuses to seek justification in the dirty reality of resistance struggle, questioning the demand that everything must be sacrificed to the cause.

Yusuf's example also points to the political danger contained in the ANC's way of assuming responsibility. The ANC tended to attribute human rights violations committed on the part of liberation activists to diversions from its policy: for instance, to excessive zeal, a desire for revenge or poor reconnaissance on the part of individual resistance fighters.¹⁰⁴ The TRC, to the contrary, held the ANC collectively responsible for the abuses against civilians, those perceived to be "collaborators" and the so-called "enemy agents." It also found that violations against the latter two categories amounted to a systematic pattern of violence.¹⁰⁵ However, its analysis focused primarily on outlining how and why these actions constituted instances of moral wrongdoing, rather than critically evaluating the forms of reasoning that rationalized and allowed them to become systematic. This aspect comes to light in the testimony of a former MK (military wing of the ANC, called *Umkhonto we Sizwe*) commander and amnesty applicant, Robert McBride. In his statement, McBride expressed his regret over the suffering caused in "a quest for my own freedom and a quest to unshackle myself from the apartheid system." He added he had voiced his concern over potential civilian

casualties, but was told by his ANC commander that “the injury to civilians was a secondary consideration at that stage.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the troubling practice of rationalizing violence is evident in the testimony of Andrew Masondo, the ANC’s national political commissar. Talking about the abuses committed against so-called “enemy agents” in the Quatro detention camp, he said: “People who it was found that they were enemy agents, we executed them, and I wouldn’t make an apology. We were at war.”¹⁰⁷ Both testimonies expose how quickly the practice of justifying ignoble means by worthy ends might derail, and lead to a situation not too different from the generalized state of emergency and impunity characterizing apartheid.¹⁰⁸ Simultaneously, they foreground the burden of responsibility as the need for constant vigilance against subtle forms of complicity in the conditions that normalized human rights violations.

2. Wicomb’s *David’s Story*: Resisting the victim-executioner binary

David’s Story is situated in 1991, the eve of South African liberation and its first democratic election. We meet David, a former resistance fighter, who tries to come to terms with human rights violations committed by the liberation movement. He wishes to tell his story, but is “simply unable/unwilling” to do so.¹⁰⁹ A woman narrator – his

amanuensis, whom he employs to help write the tale – must construct the story while David distances himself from the text through constant digressions and denials.

We read that David is a dutiful ANC cadre, who has “no illusions about war,” and often lectures his amanuensis that lies, errors and crimes are an inevitable part of the fight for freedom and justice.¹¹⁰ It was “military values,” he says, that brought us all this far, including those liberals, “the likes of you, who believe in keeping your hands clean at all cost.”¹¹¹ Therefore, it comes as a troubling revelation that David himself spent some time in the Quatro camp. He supported the mutineers’ demands for greater democracy within the ANC, was put in solitary confinement and tortured, an experience that even to his wife he jokingly refers to as “initiation rites.”¹¹² We also read his judgement about the execution of mutineers: “what else could have been done [...] in the face of a steady infiltration of enemy agents?”¹¹³ The difficulty David encounters in confronting his past, however, is captured through Dulcie’s character, a “scream somehow echoing through my story” and “a disturbance at this very time of liberation.”¹¹⁴

Dulcie, we learn from scattered references and hints, is a high-ranking member of the ANC, whose presence in the text is conveyed through an image of the tortured body, existing “before [David’s] very eyes.”¹¹⁵ While the ambiguous passages leave it unclear whether Dulcie was tortured by the security police or her own comrades,¹¹⁶ we are compelled to ask whether David himself is in some way implicated. His betrayal seems

to lie in remaining silent about the violence committed against her and so affirming his complicity with a system, where truth must remain “black and white” and where the rape and torture of women must remain an acceptable and hidden part of the struggle.¹¹⁷ We learn that some of the mutineers “might have been trained by Dulcie,” and also that comrades have always “assumed” Dulcie and David, both coloureds, to be “somehow working together” – making both suspect to the Movement.¹¹⁸ To admit his love for Dulcie or any special relationship between them, further, would be “to betray the cause.”¹¹⁹

In line with Camus’s concern with the persistent effects of systematic injustice, the novel thus exposes the resilient conditions that made human rights violations justifiable. David remains caught in a victim-executioner binary. He seems resigned that any attempt to defend and restore the memory of his beloved – and so openly consider the costs of the resistance struggle – would land him in direct opposition to the Movement. It was these conditions that the TRC’s abstract judgement did not adequately tackle. If the Commission’s principle of legal equivalence was to lead to a new unity across divisions, it missed out on the persistence of undemocratic social and political structures that silenced opposition and reduced the exercise of power to the pursuit of ideologically motivated interests.¹²⁰ Yet, the narrative’s many voices – a constant back and forth between David, the voices of other characters and the writer – point to the possibility of displacing the stale ideological binaries characterizing the predominant

discourse, and reveal the ambiguities, disagreements and tensions obliterated from the official story.¹²¹ Towards the end, while insisting on the justness of the resistance struggle, David admits that the treatment of Dulcie was due to the power struggles within the Movement: “Yes, she’s grown too big for her boots and they’ve had enough of her [...]”.¹²² An encounter between different perspectives then shows the sterility of the choice between confronting the “abominable” realities of resistance with simplified liberal “pieties,” and unquestioningly justifying them as an inevitable part of the struggle.¹²³ It is the clinging on to ideological divides that risks a lapse into “a corrupted version of the freedom” that the struggle rose up to defend, and into an “embrace [of] our [previous] oppressors.”¹²⁴

It is perhaps Dulcie’s example, her unwavering will to resist,¹²⁵ that leads David, even if indirectly, to question the emerging intolerance and practices of exclusion within the ANC. In an attempt to retrieve the dignity of his origins, he becomes preoccupied with reclaiming the non-racial history of the Griquas, a subgroup of coloured people, traditionally known for their support of the apartheid policy of separate development. David finds that initially their Chief, Andrew Le Fleur, was a genuine rebel, tirelessly fighting colonial injustice. Due to various disappointments, betrayals and growing poverty in his community, he got “bought” by the settlers’ offer of land for his people and “converted” to the idea of separate homelands.¹²⁶ For David, the problem was that, in his grand theory of a chosen race, Le Fleur “had no idea he was betraying his ideals,

falling into the hands of the policymakers.”¹²⁷ It is unsurprising that David’s research is taken as a “breach of loyalty:” it challenges both the prejudice against blacks within the coloured community, as well as the growing ethnic ideology within the Movement.¹²⁸ Similarly, his inquiry into history reveals how the Chief’s call for justice for his people simultaneously imposes “a bundle of dreary” rules of behaviour upon the women of the community. Further, he keeps his wife locked in the private sphere, away from his “clandestine activities” that are deemed “too complicated” for the “second sex.”¹²⁹ Through the voice of David’s wife, Sally, however, we learn that, paradoxically, this history of oppression has been thoughtlessly repeated during the period of the liberation struggle and continues in the contemporary political climate. Using his influence in the Movement, David makes Sally quit her underground work and devote herself to community issues, a decision that leaves her “listless.”¹³⁰ For all his obsession with Dulcie’s suffering, he fails to consider that Sally, too, had experienced “this unspoken part of a girl’s training.”¹³¹

The novel heeds Camus’s artistic commitment to confronting the resilient conditions that made human rights violations possible through a resolute refusal of a choice between being either a victim or an executioner. Considering the grey zone of violent rebellion in a plural, contextual perspective, it enables us both to praise the inspiring promise of the fight against injustice, as well as explore how and why it degenerated into a corruption of freedom. Such inquiry then need not discredit the resistance

struggle, nor leave out a consideration of the oppressive system which the struggle had sought to overthrow. On the contrary, it constitutes an appeal to a continued fight against all denials of human dignity regardless of the perpetrating side. For this reason, it seems fitting to conclude this section with the same words that David had wanted to end his story: “Viva the Struggle, Viva!”¹³²

V. Conclusion

Using Camus’s artistic sensibility the article confronted the difficulty of judging the grey zone within violent resistance – a problematic that remains insufficiently explored in transitional justice scholarship. In particular, it revealed how Camus’s insight into the lived dimension of violent rebellion, its ambiguities and limits, can enrich the TRC’s abstract judgement of the human rights abuses committed by liberation fighters. Here an important caveat is necessary. It may be argued that a focus on the ambiguities of violent resistance unduly places the burden of responsibility at the doorstep of those fighting for freedom and justice, while absolving from blame the far greater violence of systemic oppression. As I have tried to show drawing on Camus, however, this need not be the case. To the contrary, focusing on the grey zone of resistance makes visible the difficulty of reclaiming political action against the background of structurally embedded

violence, and represents an important resource for rethinking the politics of reconciliation.

Camus's situated insight into the contradiction of violent rebellion exposes the limits of the moral discourse on reconciliation, predominant within the TRC. As argued, the TRC's principle of legal equivalence was employed to re-establish the validity of moral norms and foreground a new commonality across past divisions. The Commission's focus on the moral fact of human rights violations, however, missed out on the reproduction of oppressive structures that promote new modes of silencing and exclusion. Camus's plural judgement of the ambiguities of violent rebellion and his attentiveness to how it can both reinforce or challenge the conditions of systemic violence, in contrast, displaces the view of reconciliation as the pursuit of (moral) unity of perspectives. Instead, it foregrounds a process of assuming responsibility *for* and continued vigilance *against* entrenched ways of reasoning that render violence against others justifiable.

Relatedly, Camus's perspective on the grey zone of rebellion challenges the aspiration towards closure at the heart of the TRC's reconciliation efforts, where past suffering is to be ultimately redeemed by the promise of a just future. Camus's contextual consideration of the costs of violent rebellion here is valuable as it directs attention to the examples of solidarity instituted by the resistance struggle, while also exploring the digressions from its inspiring principle. On this account, just as there is no

ultimate end to human rebellion, no vision of transition is likely to institute a final and complete reign of justice. Instead, the purpose of reconciliation is to reclaim the potentials for human action – bearing in mind its finite and imperfect character. Camus’s loyalty to the original promise of rebellion foregrounds reconciliation as a commitment to reinvigorating community beyond the stale binary of victims and executioners, and to fighting injustice by respecting the plurality of the world.

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⁵⁶ Camus, *Caligula*, 176, 197.

⁵⁷ Camus, *The Rebel*, 255–56.

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⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

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⁶² Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 8; Hayden, *Camus and the Challenge of Political Thought*, 78.

⁶³ Camus, *Caligula*, 214.

⁶⁴ Schwarz, 'The Limits of Violence', 36.

⁶⁵ Camus, *Caligula*, 215, 219–20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁶⁷ Hayden, *Camus and the Challenge of Political Thought*, 78.

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⁸⁰ Camus, *Camus at Combat*, 272, 259.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 266–68.

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⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

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⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

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⁹² *Ibid.*, 133.

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¹⁰³ Afrika, *The Innocents*, 185.

¹⁰⁴ TRC, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 2, 327–333.

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http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans/1999/9909271013_dbn_991005db.htm.

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¹⁰⁸ Sitze, *The Impossible Machine*, 121, 126–27.

¹⁰⁹ Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (New York, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2001), 2.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹¹² Ibid., 195, 11–12.

¹¹³ Ibid., 195.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 134, 177.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 201.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 136, 140.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 200. The term coloured refers to people of “mixed racial ancestry,” who, under white domination, benefited from relative privilege and were prone to defend their position within racial hierarchy. Under the transition to majority rule, they have often encountered accusations of complicity in African oppression. See Mohamed Adhikari, *Burdened By Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2009), viii–xxxii.

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¹²¹ Stephan Meyer and Thomas Olver, ‘Zoë Wicomb Interviewed on Writing and Nation’, *Journal of Literary Studies* 18, no. 1–2 (1 June 2002), 185.

¹²² Wicomb, *David’s Story*, 204, 197.

¹²³ Olver and Meyer, ‘Zoë Wicomb on *David’s Story*’, 133.

¹²⁴ Wicomb, *David’s Story*, 196–97, 199.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 179–80.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 78, 90–93.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 147. Here, the novel importantly speaks to the TRC's note on how the new divisions within the South African society are frequently grounded in the past, with "allegations of complicity with past abuses" often serving as weapons in power struggles among and within political parties. See TRC, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 5, 425.

¹²⁹ Wicomb, *David's Story*, 49, 53.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹³¹ Ibid., 123.

¹³² Ibid., 3.